## 28. THE DESERT WHEATEAR *OENANTHE DESERTI* IN MADRAS

On the afternoon of 30 November 1986, while watching birds at the meadow on the northern banks of the Adayar Estuary, I was caught in a sudden cloudburst. As I stood still, waiting for the rain to subside, I noticed on a bare branch of a *Prosopis* bush, a small bird, about the size of a sparrow. I was close enough to get a brief but unmistakeable view of the bird to identify it as a male Desert Wheatear *Oenanthe deserti*. The bird suddenly took off, hovered like a flycatcher briefly, revealing its black and white tail pattern before flying away.

On the afternoon of 6 December 1986, however, I located the bird again, and observed it closely. There was no doubt whatsoever as to its identity. The bird was pale sandy buff on the crown, nape and back. The sides of the head, chin and throat were black, slightly speckled with white. The wings appeared to be black from a distance but a closer look revealed that they were dark blackish–brown. The upper tail coverts and basal half of the tail were white, contrasting with the otherwise black tail. The underparts were pale buff. A pale supercilium bordered the black over the eyes and the dark wings also had a whitish border. The bill and legs were dark.

The bird was seen mostly on the ground and at times, perched on small stones or atop bare branches of *Prosopis* or *Calotropis* bushes, invariably flicking its tail, flashing the contrasting tail pattern. Most of the feeding was done on the ground, although at times, the bird indulged in short flycatching sorties. On the ground, it would run in short spurts, sideways, at an angle. It would stop now and then, stretch its neck and be on alert lookout, while the tail kept flicking up and down in a manner reminiscent of a pipit or wagtail. Foraging was done in the sandy area or grassy patches and mostly small insects were devoured.

The wheatear appeared to be a loner and there were no signs of another of its species anywhere in the locality. I have seen wagtails feeding close to the wheatear and occassionally they chased each other. I also observed in one instance, a Common Swallow *Hirundo rustica* pursuing the wheatear. On 10 January 1987 I heard the bird calling in a quiet and subdued manner and subsequently these warblings were heard on a couple of occassions. Apart from this, the bird did not call and was silent throughout.

The bird appeared to be parochial, keeping to the same portion of the meadow day after day. Only once did it shift its territory to another part of the meadow. I was quite surprised at the tameness of the bird. It allowed me to approach it as close as 8–30 feet and I photographed it at this distance.

The Desert Wheatear is mainly a winter visitor to Pakistan and India and the southernmost records of this species are from central Maharashtra (Poona, Ahmednagar) and northern Andhra Pradesh (Nirmal) (Ali and Ripley 1983). In view of this fact, the occurrence of this species in Madras city, far from its usual winter range is noteworthy. The bird was seen in Madras at the same locality for over months and was last seen on 1 February 1987. Thereafter, the site was visited on 14 February 1987 and 15 February 1987 but the bird was not to be seen.

June 9, 1987. V. SANTHARAM

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## 29. TREECREEPER (CERTHIIDAE) NESTING IN WESTERN NEPAL

A late spring trek in 1985 afforded me the opportunity to gather nesting data on birds in the remote and rugged Lake Rara–Jumla area of western Nepal.

On 9 May 1985, I observed a pair of nesting Common Treecreepers *Certhia familiaris mandelli* while travelling northwest from the regional center of Jumla. This record occurred at approximately 3250 m elevation, some 400 m beyond the hamlet of Thahamari, and 15 m from the main trail that traverses the north slope of Dori Lekh.

The nest was located at a height of 5 m in a trunk crevice of a dead fir *Abies spectabilis*, which unfortunately could not be closely examined. Nonetheless, it was evident that chicks were present, as both parents busily foraged lepidopteran larvae and small insects. One parent would remain on the nest, occasionally poking its head out of the crevice, until the other returned with food, whereupon the waiting parent would immediately dart off in search of prey. I returned to this site on 20 and 21 May 1985 after completing a circuit to the north. There was no further activity at the nest, but on 21 may a single treecreeper, most likely *C. f. mandelli* although not positively identified was noted briefly in the vicinity high up

a conifer.

Habitat at this site is mixed montane forest of fir *A. spectabilis* and birch *Betula utilis* with scattered maple *Acer* sp., and a relatively open understorey of saplings, shrubs and bamboo *Arundinaria* spp.

*C.f. mandelli* ranges from the Kulu region of northwest India across the Nepalese Himalaya to extreme western Arunachal Pradesh (Tawang; Ali and Ripley 1973). Its abundance has been variously reported as occasional (Fleming *et al.* 1984), fairly common (Inskipp and Inskipp 1985), and common (Ali and Ripley 1973). However, few breeding data exist for this treecreeper subspecies. Nest building in an old fir stump at 3355 m was recorded by Polunin on 19 April 1952 at Punga Lekh, Jumla district (Inskipp and Inskipp 1985). Juveniles independent of parents were collected at 3950 m and 4200 m in Khumbu, East Nepal in June 1962 (Diesselhorst 1968). Thus, this most recent breeding record is similar to those previously noted with respect to nesting habitat, elevation, and temporal activity.

Also on 9 May 1985, but further northwest of Dori Lekh along the Khapar Khola, I noted nesting activity of the Himalayan Treecreeper *C. himalayana infima* near Bumra village at about 2740 m. A single bird, presumably a female, was observed in an open riverside grove hitching up a walnut *Juglans regia* tree with a beakful of short yellow grass. A pursuing Sparrow Hawk *Accipiter nisus* thrice attempted to grab her by clumsily manoeuvering through the branches, but each time the treecreeper successfully evaded the raptor by sidling around the walnut trunk, until it flew off unnoticed.

The four certhiid species in Nepal all occur in the far western region. However, the Brown-throated Treecreeper *C. discolor discolor* and the Rusty-flanked Treecreeper *C. nepalensis* are primarily eastern Himalayan species, sparsely distributed at the western limits of their ranges (Inskipp and Inskipp 1985). Niche distinctions between the more common *C.f. mandelli* and C. h. infima remain poorly understood, although the former appears to favour higher altitude mixed conifer forests where associated rhododendron *Rhododendron* spp. is replaced with birch (Martens 1981, Inskipp and Inskipp 1985). Clearly, further study of certhiid ecology in western Nepal, especially breeding biology and factors affecting competitive exclusion, is needed.

September 26, 1987. JACK H. COX

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## 30. FOREST WAGTAIL *MOTACILLA INDICA* AT JASDAN, GUJARAT

On 19 November 1987 I saw a single Forest Wagtail Motacilla indica in my compound. The bird was seen again on 21st and 22nd and I managed to catch it in a mist net on 23 November 1987 and ring it (ring No. A. 39294). This bird is a rare winter visitor to Gujarat.

November 28, 1987. SATYAJIT KHACHAR

## 31. HOST PLANTS USED BY BAYA WEAVER BIRD *PLOCEUS PHILIPPINUS* (L.) FOR NESTING IN UDAIPUR DISTRICT, RAJASTHAN

During the breeding season of 1986, I surveyed some parts of Udaipur District of Southern Rajasthan to study the free preference of *Ploceus philippinus* for nesting. I travelled on foot or cycle and sometimes by motorcycle along the different roads in the district. I surveyed a 50 m wide strip of land on either sides of the 200 km. long road in different localities including some forest areas like the Keora Ki Nall Reserve Forest and Banki Block of Udaipur (south) Division and Jaisamand Wildlife Sanctuary. My findings are as below (Tables 1 & 2).